

In Search of "Home": *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*
Eds. Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul Kumar
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A volume in six parts that take as their respective starting points themes and concepts which resonate with the history and literature of an entire sub-continent: this is a massive undertaking indeed. Three essays in Part I question the divisions created by the historical fact of Partition in 1947, three in Part II look at "home" in the social contexts of nationalism and exile, and three in Part III examine linguistic interpretations of "home" across historical time and diasporic space. In Part IV, the study moves from the general to the particular, focusing on gender as women seek a place they can call "home," and fashion ways of describing and narrating it. In Part V, memory comes into its own: ancestral style and simplicity co-exist with colonial clutter in the decoration and furnishing of a family's living space. Finally, Part VI conducts the reader from social history to literature, by way of sensitive analyses of Indian fiction and Pakistani poetry.

This is not the kind of book which readers approach by beginning at the beginning. Inevitably, each of us will bring to it certain well-established interests and, on finding that the editors have thoughtfully planted signposts directing us, we will temporarily bypass certain sections as worthy but irrelevant to our special concerns, and zoom in on what fascinates us. In my case, it was Part V that drew me in first and, within it, Rosinka Chaudhuri's fascinating study of "The Nationalization of the Indian Drawing Room" over a century (1830-1930) of colonial/postcolonial experience. Examining the gradual stylistic changes in Bengali home interiors based on the pattern of Rabindranath Tagore's family house at Jorasanko in Calcutta (which I had the pleasure of visiting in 1983 and was now enabled to view in retrospect) Chaudhuri provides both perspective and intricate detail, indicating above all the manner in which a certain individual aesthetic style particular to an aristocratic, intellectual elite flowed into general use, emerging as an appreciation of the indigenous.

Regardless of where they begin, readers will move to other parts of the book. Here, as at a well-appointed feast, it would be best to set out exactly what is on offer, and who has prepared it. Debali Mookerjee-Leonard's interest in post-colonial short fiction takes up subjects such as national identity and gendered violence, leading her to interrogate (in "Divided Homelands, Hostile Homes") conventional ideals of the home as

“safe space” and the family as “unconditionally loving.” In an essay that focuses in turn on housing, diet, money, dress and family relationships (“At Home in a Resettlement Colony”), Anjali Gera Roy, a specialist in contemporary African literature studies, turns her attention to the lineaments of an “aesthetic of resettlement” as developed in Lucknow by refugees from partitioned Punjab. Sukrita Paul Kumar, who combines the writing of poetry and criticism with the disciplines of translation and teaching, is well-equipped to examine the ways in which the experience of Partition shaped the literary activity of fiction-writers on both sides of the border (“Translating India as the Other: Partition and After”).

Sri Lanka, still locked into its long-drawn-out ethnic conflict as a Tamil minority moves from freedom struggle to vengeance and back again: this is the background of Sharanya Jayawickrama’s study of a “factional” account of growing up gay in a society at war with itself, demonizing homosexuality while simultaneously repudiating its Tamil inheritance (“At Home in the Nation? Negotiating Identity in Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*”). From there it is an easy and natural transition to Niranjan Mohanty’s essay “Subsuming the ‘Nation’ within ‘Home’,” in which a practising poet analyses the work of one of the great poetic masters of our generation, A.K. Ramanujan, and thence to Sanjukta Dasgupta’s study of transplanted women writers of the Indian diaspora (among them Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and Kavita Daswani) in a wide-ranging essay, “Locating ‘Home’ in a Liminal Space: Longing and Belonging in the Fiction of ‘Bengali’ American Women Writers.”

Next, Sneja Gunew’s essay, “‘Mouthwork’,” examines the treatment of food and language in the writing of South Asian women of the diaspora. Charles Sarvan, a writer who has himself experienced exile, considers the colonial and postcolonial experience of “Home” in two Sri Lankan works of fiction, Jean Arasanayagam’s “The Garden Party” and Shyam Selvadurai’s *Funny Boy*. Mridula Nath Chakraborty adopts the language and technique of psychoanalysis in examining the “Transference and the Writing of ‘Home’ in the Psychobab(el) of Diaspora.”

An aside—this last piece provided me with an unforeseen pleasure. Most reviewers pursue their search for sense and meaning in a text, thinking themselves secure from allusion. When, unexpectedly, I found Ms Chakraborty confessing that “the sheer virtuosity of . . . Yasmine Gooneratne . . . continues to astound and amaze [her],” I was pleased but puzzled as to what my proper reaction to such a comment should be. I can only hope that “virtuosity” and playfulness as perceived (and I do believe, enjoyed!) by this writer in two of my novels will tempt her to purchase the third (*The Sweet and Simple Kind*, 2006).

In her essay “*Not a Home*: Hindi Women Poets narrating ‘Home’,” Lucy Rosenstein brings to the subject of ‘Home’ a feminist viewpoint shaped in Europe. Moving from Ruskin’s concept of Woman as a “walled garden” of peace and restfulness for the patriarchal male to Michelle Cliff’s vision of an open space where women can live and work, Rosenstein examines Indian interpretations of these themes, while Pamela

Lothspeich examines, in Surendra Verma's controversial 1971 play *Draupadi*, ways in which "the microcosm of a mundane, domestic setting can be related to the macrocosm of the post-Independence nation." Bidisha Banerjee considers, in "No Nation Woman," the search by women of the diaspora for a place they can regard as "home," focusing particular attention on a short story by Jhumpa Lahiri in which the eponymous Mrs Sen, a Bengali immigrant in the USA, tries (and fails) to build a diasporic identity for herself.

Part V of this fascinating collection presents, in addition to the Chaudhuri essay I referred to above, a study by Lloyd I. Rudolph and Susanne Hoeber Rudolph of diaries kept by a Rajput land-owner and cavalry officer over forty-four years, from 1898 to 1942. Amar Singh moved between the court society of Jaipur and Jodhpur and the discipline, manners and mores of the British Raj in its Edwardian years. Here was a situation in which a writer's truest "home" was in his diary, the one place in which he could be himself. "The Construction of Home in Amar Singh's Diary" provides extracts from the text that simultaneously document the colonial society of the time and touch the reader's heart with revealing glimpses of the writer's innermost, most secret self.

Next, Syamala Kallury and Anjana Neira Dev collaborate on an essay that focuses on post-Independence poetry, in particular the English poetry of Jayanta Mahapatra and Sujata Bhatt. They are justly aware of what every postcolonial poet knows from experience, that her creativity is poised between two "worlds": the inherited tradition of familial, cultural and social background, and the western traditions "behind" the chosen language of expression. The "important questions," for them, relate to memory, genealogy and what the two essayists call "the materials and modes of experience". The fact that Bhatt and Mahapatra differ from each other so markedly in the themes and textures of their poetry increases the interest of this excellent essay.

Pradumnya S. Chauhan's essay, "'Home' and the Construction of New English Fiction," is much more straightforward than its companions in this section—Part V: Family/ Memory—because her ground has been covered so many times before that much of what it has to say sounds familiar. But even there, we are presented by fresh and unusual insights. Take, for instance, the "case" of Arnold J. Toynbee, known to all and sundry as a true "citizen of the world," an impression justified by his "monumental" work, *A Study of History*. Who would have associated Toynbee with a "local habitation and a name"? And yet, so it is:

The navel of my earth is not in Greece, though my heart and mind reside there . . . My world navel is the Albert Memorial in Kensington Gardens, [where] I used to play around its steps when I was a tiny child. This British monument may be comically ugly but, to me, it is reassuringly familiar.

Salman Rushdie and Vijaya Lakshmi, the two Indian novelists on whose work the argument of this essay turns, are seen as essentially subversive in

their intentions, whether they resist or accommodate the host culture that offers them physical shelter.

“On the Becoming and Existence of Home: Inequities, Disparities and the Novel in India” is the seventeenth essay in this collection. Vibha S. Chauhan looks at the ways in which traditional social norms militate against attempts to rise in the world, to build a better, more comfortable life for the protagonist, Kali, in Jagdish Chandra’s Hindi novel *Dharati Dhan Na Apna (The Land That Will Never Be Ours)*, 1972. A house of brick, or even of mud, is out of the question for a member of the low-caste chamar community. No Sri Lankan reading this would fail to be reminded of Martin Wickramasinghe’s classic Sinhala novel *Gam Peraliya (Change in the Village)*, in which a well-educated schoolmaster is rejected as a son-in-law by a rural upper-class magnate—not because of any disparity of caste, but because the schoolmaster’s father had been once a seller of vegetables and borne his wares on his shoulder. This essay ends with a challenge to the genre of the Indian novel and the sensibility of the Indian novelist:

For novelists to write about the myriad forms of home, of homelessness, or of the unending search of millions [in India] for homes, they must locate themselves [and their characters] in homes that have open doors and windows connecting them to these millions. Since a novel is ultimately all about how individuals or collectives go through a change in their mental, relational, and/or ideological homes, it is the best literary genre available today for portraying much more of the genesis, evolution and the dynamics of home.

Finally, an essay that focuses on Pakistan: Muneeza Shamsie’s “Complexities of Home and Homeland in Pakistani English Poetry and Fiction.” As the author of the only piece that examines the literary productions of India’s near neighbour, Shamsie takes on the responsibility of constructing a literary survey, beginning with Shahid Subrawardy (1890-1965) and Ahmed Ali (1908-1994), who were, at the time of Partition, the best-known English-language writers in Pakistan. Shamsie identifies a “major breakthrough” for the region’s writing in the publication in 1981 of Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Then come the anthologies, beginning with Shahid Hosain’s *First Voices* (1965), followed by the names (familiar to this reviewer) of the poet Alamgir Hashmi and the novelist Bapsi Sidhwa. This essay, due to the author’s brave decision to examine not one genre but two, and not one or two writers but many, could easily have degenerated into a string of names. To the credit of its author and the co-editors of this book, it does not do so, providing the reader instead with insights into a total literature.

I have observed that the actual process of writing, together with the elements which contribute to the sensibility of authors, whether home-based or expatriate, are often quite unknown to the academics who teach literature and the reviewers who are called upon to comment on it. Too often we academics have hobby-horses to ride and—to change the metaphor—barrows of our own to push. Malashri Lal and Sukrita Paul

Kumar avoid the temptation to join in this kind of literary “criticism”: the essays they have chosen to present here provide plenty of detail, enough to inspire ideas and flesh out every argument. While *Interpreting Homes in South Asian Literature*, due to its impressive range and scope, merits an honoured place in academic libraries, it has a special relevance to the needs of the creative writer.